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ABSTRACT

This module on characteristics of adults as learners is the ninth of 11 modules in the set, Introduction to Teaching Adults. Designed to meet the learning needs of part-time continuing education instructors, these modules can be used as resource materials for local workshops or study-discussion groups, as self-instruction (each module takes approximately two hours), and as a correspondence course. (Source information on correspondence study is cited in module 1.) All modules except the first are designed to be used in part in conjunction with an audiotape. The purpose of the module is to identify six key characteristics of adults as learners and to suggest ways of taking them into account when teaching. Information is provided on these six characteristics: (1) adult life cycle, (2) immediate time orientation, (3) broad base of experience, (4) independent self-concept, (5) gradual state of physical decline, and (6) a number of social roles to be fulfilled. (YLB)

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INTRODUCTION TO TEACHING ADULTS

MODULE 9

UNDERSTANDING THE ADULT AS LEARNER

Prepared by:
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1981

CE 030 323

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MODULE 9: UNDERSTANDING THE ADULT AS LEARNER

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MODULE 9

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ABOUT THIS PROGRAM

This series of modules was developed by the Division of Adult Education and the Centre for Continuing Education of the University of British Columbia under contract with the Ministry of Education of the Province of British Columbia. The series was developed under the direction of Gary Dickinson, and Sandy McGechaen supervised the production.

The eleven modules in the complete program are:

Level I

1 Guidelines for Teachers of Adults

Level II

2 Using Instructional Techniques
3 Using Instructional Media
4 Using Evaluation Instruments

Level III

5 Designing Instruction
6 Writing Instructional Objectives
7 Managing Instruction
8 Enhancing Motivation

Level IV

9 Understanding the Adult as Learner
10 Understanding the Learning Process
11 Continuing Your Development

MODULE 9: UNDERSTANDING THE ADULT AS LEARNER

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INTRODUCTION

The characteristics of adults as learners provide a starting point for an approach to instruction. The purpose of this module is to identify six key characteristics of adults as learners and to suggest ways of taking them into account when teaching. When you have completed this module, you should be able to adjust your instruction to better meet the needs of adult learners.

This module contains information describing the characteristics of adults as learners. The cassette contains a discussion by several experienced instructors who talk about how they modify their teaching to suit the characteristics of adult learners. Read the booklet first and then listen to the tape. The assignment at the end of the booklet should help you do a better job of adapting your approach to suit the nature of the learning group.

Throughout this module it would be helpful to you if you would think of the characteristics of adult learners as their "personalities". Ask yourself the question "How can I adjust my instruction to fit each adult learner's personality?" One of your main jobs is to take into account the individual differences presented by each student. In that sense, you must act as a "psychologist" to some extent.

It would be helpful at the beginning if you can separate the questions "how people learn in general" and "how personalities influence the capacity to benefit from instruction." Try to think of learning as a set of internal processes used by all human beings to acquire new capabilities or to change old ones. Adults do this throughout their lifetime and the processes remain the same. We will talk about them specifically in Module 10 — The Learning Process. What does change over time, of course, is the individual's personality. As people accumulate experience over a lifetime, their view of the world changes and the way they relate to the world changes. This shift in the way adults see the world provides a way of describing adults as learners, and for developing a strategy for teaching them. The learning process is basically the same for all human learners, but what is different about adult learners is the particular way we provide the instruction to account for each adult's peculiar personality.

At first glance the job seems impossible. How can you as an instructor hope to adjust your teaching for each learner to reflect his or her individual differences? What you can do is adjust your instruction to reflect six general characteristics of adult learners: 1) adult life cycle, 2) immediate time orientation, 3) broad base of experience, 4) independent self concept, 5) a gradual state of physical decline, and 6) a number of social roles to be fulfilled. This module will look at each of these characteristics to see how they influence instruction for adults. Before we do this however, let us consider where learning occurs.

SETTINGS FOR LEARNING

Although the amount of learning adults do varies enormously from person to person, it is safe to say that they are capable of learning at any time and in any place. Learning occurs inside the individual but receives some support from the outside world. This support comes from two main settings: the **natural societal setting** and the **formal instructional setting.**

Adults may learn through everyday experiences including job, family, and hobby activities. In this natural societal setting, learning is casual, not very well planned, and often incidental. For example, someone waiting for an automobile to be repaired might learn by observing the repair process without being conscious of having learned. An adult may watch a documentary television program with the intent of acquiring information. The adult could learn in both these situations but not attain the systematic achievement possible in an instructional setting. Learning in "the school of hard knocks" is really no school at all, not because no one learns in it but because no one teaches. In this program for teaching adults we will look at ways of providing men and women with deliberate learning experiences instead of trusting to the accidents by which they might learn. Those accidents will not be taken out of the adult's life. Indeed, one of the principles of adult instruction is to use the life experiences of adults as an element of strength. Learning can take place anytime and anywhere, but support from the external world is usually more efficient in aiding the learning process.

In the formal instructional setting, the external support for learning is more systematic. Although learning may occur anywhere and under any circumstances, it is more apt to occur when specific processes to aid it are applied systematically. Learning is more efficient when it is directed by an instructor who provides organization and control.

Learning occurs within the central nervous system of an individual. Instruction occurs outside the individual and is a set of conditions established to aid learning. Through selected activities, the instructor establishes conditions contributing to the achievement of learning objectives. Instruction encourages learning to occur at a more rapid and efficient rate.

The basic difference between learning in the natural societal setting and education is that of systematic instruction. The systematic aspect includes setting a time limit on learning activities. Regardless of the learner's intentions, effective instruction is aided by selecting a time limit which set boundaries to what can be taught. In addition to this time limit, a continuing and direct relationship between the learner and the instructor is maintained. Both of these aspects are influenced by the characteristics of the adult learner to which we will now turn.

THE ADULT LIFE CYCLE

Up until now we have been talking as though all adult learners possess a fixed amount of the six characteristics mentioned earlier. It will be more useful to think of learning for individuals at different ages and at different stages throughout the life span. As individuals move through the life span, they show the characteristics of the adult learner to varying degrees. If we can learn to recognize the characteristics and the degree to which an individual learner possesses them, we can change our instruction to reflect them.

During the cycle of an individual's life, certain things need to be learned. These are called developmental tasks. Some understanding of the tasks an individual faces is essential for an instructor. It is generally agreed that the life tasks of children, adolescents, and adults are different. There is also a right time for certain kinds of learning based on these life tasks.

There are different ways of determining developmental tasks over the life span. Although writers differ about the order in which the tasks arise and the nature of some of the tasks, they all suggest that the appearance and solution of development tasks accounts for the successful change from one life cycle stage to the next. Robert Havighurst, a noted developmental theorist, suggests that adults undergo the following changes throughout the life span:

Early Adulthood (ages 18-30)

- selecting a mate
- learning to live with a marriage partner
- starting a family
- rearing children
- managing a home
- getting started in an occupation
- taking on civic responsibility
- finding a congenial social group

Middle Age (ages 30-55)

- achieving adult civic and social responsibility
- establishing and maintaining an economic standard of living
- assisting teenage children to become responsible and happy adults
- developing adult leisure-time activities
- relating to one's spouse as a person
- accepting and adjusting to the physiological changes of middle age
- adjusting to aging parents

Later Maturity (age 55 and over)

- adjusting to decreasing physical strength and health
- adjusting to retirement and reduced income
- adjusting to the death of a spouse
- establishing an affiliation with one's age group
- meeting social and civic obligations
- establishing satisfactory physical living arrangements

The "age" of an adult learner can perhaps best be defined as the total achievement of these developmental tasks at a particular point.

The notion that the developmental tasks of an adult are different from those of children is a crucial characteristic of the adult learner because it provides a way of looking at other characteristics. The idea that adults continuously make adjustments to the changing conditions of their lives as they grow older is a useful way of thinking about adult learners. The position on the life span is an important indicator of the learner's personality. One famous adult educator, Edouard Lindeman, suggested that the adult life cycle consists of successive evaluations of experiences. In youth we need to extract from life its highest yield of emotional experience, but if intelligence does not enter to temper and give meaning to emotions we grow old without growing up.

IMMEDIATE TIME ORIENTATION

They way in which time is perceived is a useful way of looking at the progression of the adult years. It makes a great deal of difference in one's view of learning whether life lies ahead as it does at age 21, is about midway at age 40, or is largely in the past at 70. Awareness of the situation by the learner and the instructor can have a profound effect on a program of instruction.

Adults frequently face tasks of responsibilities which require efforts beforehand to gain knowledge and skill for successful performance. When the central concern is a new task or decision, adults will not be very interested in learning a complete body of subject matter. Instead, they will want only the knowledge and skill that will be useful in dealing with the particular responsibility of the moment. For example, a learner would not want to go through a 300 hour course in mechanics to learn bicycle repairs, but would want to gain the skill needed to repair the immediate problem. In contrast to the adult's immediate orientation or problem-solving focus regarding learning, a child's time perspective is one of delayed application. Learning accumulates into a reservoir of skills and knowledge that will be useful later.

The immediate orientation to learning provides the instructor with suggestions for designing and managing adult instruction. Each developmental task faced by the adult involves a learning component. As each new development task arises, a "teachable" moment occurs in which the adult is highly motivated and willing to learn. In some cases the educational program may deal directly with a developmental task so that motivation is high. In other instances, new material must be adjusted to the learner's current developmental tasks to increase the probability of learning.

Awareness about the immediate orientation to learning based on the developmental tasks of the learner produces a principle for adult instruction of identifying problem areas rather than subject categories. The importance of starting with the problems and concerns that the learners bring with them cannot be overemphasized. Prior to meeting the learner, considerable effort goes into analyzing the capabilities to be learned and planning instruction. However, the immediate orientation to learning displayed by adult learners dictates that one of the first steps in managing instruction is to take a problem census. Adult learners should be asked to identify what it is that they are curious about, worried about, or concerned about. The instructional program should then be built around the adult learners' curiosities and concerns.

BROAD BASE OF EXPERIENCE

An obvious fact about adult learners which makes them different from children is that adults have had more time and greater opportunities for experience. That experience affects the adult's ability to perceive, process, and use information. The basic idea is that the adult's accumulated experience in some way influences his/her learning ability. Experience results in knowledge which provides a foundation for additional knowledge. For the child, each new concept starts from the beginning, whereas the achievement of adult understanding takes place slowly as old knowledge is gradually built up with new experience. In contrast to the child, the adult learner needs to be more concerned with relating new material to what is already known than with acquiring the basic elements of knowledge. Once the right relationship is established, then the new idea or skill takes its place in the whole of the individual's past experience. Past experience is then brought to bear on the interpretation and understanding of new events.

The broad experience base of the adult learner tends to clash with the idea that the instructor has something new to transmit to the learner. If you as an instructor place too much concentration on what you are going to teach rather than how you are going to fit it into what the adult learners already know, you will have missed a vital and exciting aspect of teaching adults. Teaching adults is not unlike being a detective. Your job is to penetrate the minds of the learners in order to find out how they think. One does not penetrate another person's mind by lecturing. Listening is an important activity for the instructor of adults, yet it tends to be overlooked when we think about the instructor's role.

The instructor can do a number of things to tap the stored knowledge and attitudes of the adult learner. By using instructional techniques that draw upon adult experience such as group discussion, role playing, simulation exercises, laboratory methods, and skill-practice exercises as described in Module 2 — Using Instructional Techniques, the instructor can tap the richness of the learner's background for the benefit of other learners. Group members often possess skills and information more relevant to fellow learners than the instructor's stored knowledge. One prominent adult educator suggested that adults are very zealous about maintaining the worth of their experiences. Whenever they find people devaluing their experiences or not paying attention to them, they feel rejected as people.

Although we have noticed the advantages of the knowledge stored by adults, a word of caution is necessary. Some of the stored knowledge and attitudes may hinder the adult learner. Most familiar is the negative attitude toward school that the adult may remember. The instructor must try to give the learner a sense of security and mastery without any feeling of shame or inadequacy. The instructor needs to be skillful in helping adults to look at themselves and their experiences objectively.

INDEPENDENT SELF-CONCEPT

A principal contributor to the self-concept of an adult is the roles he or she plays in life and the way in which those roles are played. Roles tend to follow one another so that a change in role requires a change in behavior, such as when a man passes from bachelor to father to grandfather. Role changes help to cause certain changes in the self, and thereby transform a person's identity over the life span.

The developmental tasks discussed earlier provide a basis for understanding the adult learner's changing self concept. Success in various social roles gives many adult learners a sense of self-esteem and independence. Adolescents move out of the family which raised them and create their own families, for whose welfare they are responsible. Their primary loyalty shifts to the new family, and the coming of their own children symbolizes adulthood both psychologically and socially. At the same time, financial independence is achieved by entering the labour force on a full-time basis.

Over the course of the life span, the self concept changes from dependence to independence. If to be adult is to be self-directing, then we can easily understand an adult learner's resentment and resistance at being put into situations which make them feel that others are imposing their will on them. Indeed, we can expect adult learners not to function in the traditional role of student. If they participate in formal instructional activities while continuing to hold an occupational role, we can be sure that authority and power relationships with the instructor will be quite different from those of the traditional student.

Not all students have been successful with their life tasks. Those who have not often tend to be dependent and quite unwilling at the beginning to engage in self-directed learning behavior. They require a somewhat different instructional approach than their more independent counterparts.

Involving the learner in determining what is to be learned and how it will be learned is asbsolutely essential. Although the institution you are employed by has certain constraints it must operate within, there is always some latitude and you should use it. At the very least, you will be able to involve the learners in deciding how they will go about learning. The effort you spend in involving the learners will pay dividends in terms of their motivation. One adult educator recommends spending twenty-five percent of the educational program on decisions about what to learn and how to go about learning. Although you may not want to take that much time, examine your current effort and decide whether it seems adequate.

In our efforts to involve the learners, it is necessary to minimize the threat in the learning situation. Setting a climate that is non-threatening, yet challenging enough to the learner, begins even before you meet the learners. The physical environment should be one in which adults feel at ease. Furniture should be adult-sized, classrooms should be arranged informally, and the decorations should be suitable to adult tastes. Such preparations made prior to the learners' arrival will do much to make them feel at ease.

Another important factor in reducing threat is the behavior of the instructor: this is probably the most decisive factor in setting the psychological climate. Teachers convey their attitudes toward learners in a thousand ways. Making the effort to learn their names is one way, but perhaps the best is to listen. Listening to learners' concerns accomplishes two things. First, it demonstrates through behavior your commitment to them as persons. Second, it provides them with an opportunity to commit themselves publicly. It is one thing to say something to yourself, but it is quite another thing to say it publicly. Some psychologists suggest we learn best when we talk out loud to ourselves because it also gives us an opportunity to listen. The instructor's role is to be the audience for the learners' "thinking out loud", and at strategic moments to reflect the conversation they are having with themselves. You might want to consider such approaches in dealing with the independent self-concept of the adult learner.

PHYSICAL DECLINE

Physical abilities decline with age, but the need to learn new things continues at every stage of life. The success of efforts to learn is affected by the ability to learn, motivation, and physiological state. Nearly every adult experiences some kind of physical decline that can influence learning ability. Although we cannot consider all of these, there are two areas affecting all adults for which the instructor can make adjustments. As eighty-five percent of learning occurs through the use of the eyes, and loss of hearing may result in communication problems that hinder learning, vision and hearing are critical factors to consider in teaching adults.

The human eye grows and develops from birth to twenty years of age and then begins to decline. As this process continues, several things happen. After ten years of age the near-point of vision begins to move away from the eye so that between forty and fifty years of age adults usually require glasses. This change can be a source of learning difficulty, especially when adults resist getting glasses. At the same time, the capacity to distinguish distant objects diminishes. These two events combine to narrow the range of clear vision. Along with this, muscles which control the size of the pupil lose their elasticity, which limits the ability of the pupil to admit sufficient light, This further restricts vision. Finally, the speed with which the adult can switch vision from something close to something far away declines with age.

Changes in vision as age advances suggest a number of ways an instructor can help the learner to overcome some of these problems:

1. Provide adequate light for the age level of the learners. Make sure that the light does not flicker, the learners do not face direct light, and that glare is reduced or eliminated.

2. Equip work stations with special lamps which can be operated by the individual if fine detail is involved.

3. Watch for signs of visual performance problems such as fatigue, loss of attention, or frequent shifts in the position of reading materials.

4. Arrange seating so that it is close to the instructor or illustrative material.

5. Place only relevant and important items on a chalkboard.

6. Use reading materials printed on low gloss paper in large type with double spacing. Try not to use "ditto" reproductions.

Next to sight, hearing is the second most important sensory channel to the brain. Hearing peaks at around fifteen years of age followed by a gradual decline. Although defective hearing is not as prevalent as defective sight, when both occur the potential for learning problems increases. There are several things the instructor can do to offset the natural decline of hearing:

1. Attempt to eliminate or reduce outside noises that may distract or interfere with hearing.

2. Remain stationary so that learners can observe gestures that might help them understand the meaning of the message.

3. Speak slowly, distinctly, and clearly.

4. Watch the faces of learners for clues as to whether or not they can hear.

5. Repeat questions from the group so that everyone can hear them.

6. Use an overhead projector rather than the chalkboard when presenting new ideas. This will enable you to remain facing the listeners so that those who need to can lip read.

7. Use small rooms where possible as they reduce sound reflection, and use small private discussion rooms rather than having several groups in one room.

The major systems of the human body undergo changes during aging that ultimately result in reduced speed of performance and limit the activities an adult can perform. Longer reaction time and movement time must be considered when motor skills are being learned. A useful rule of thumb to apply when taking account of these physiological characteristics of the adult learner is that the **power** to learn is not appreciably reduced by aging, but in many areas the **speed** of learning is reduced. Instruction should be planned within the speed capabilities of the majority of learners in a group. The pace should be slower with older groups than with younger learners.

Few adults are aware of the degree of physiological change that results from aging. They often find difficulty in adapting and become anxious or depressed when change occurs. An instructor who recognizes these signs can play a significant role in helping adult learners adjust to the natural process of aging. At the same time that performance is being altered by physiological changes, it is also being affected by emotional responses to the changes. By helping adults understand the aging process and recognize changes as they occur, an instructor can help to reduce the psychological impact of physiological changes.

SOCIAL ROLES OF ADULTS

The primary role of children is learning. They are excused from other responsibilities such as earning a living. It is considered to be enough that children concentrate on acquiring the basic capabilities necessary to function as productive members of society. Additional responsibilities occur throughout life, and new and different tasks must be mastered in order to meet them. Learning to perform those tasks creates the need for education at all stages in life.

The responsibilities reserved for adults include such things as being economically self-sufficient, a spouse, a parent, and an active citizen. Adults must learn to perform these developmental tasks when they occur over the life span. Unlike youth, however, they are not relieved of other responsibilities while they engage in learning. For adults, the learner role is secondary to other primary roles. The shift of learning from a primary to a secondary position upon the attainment of adult status should make a significant difference in the way instruction is provided for adults.

The instructor needs to think carefully about the amount of energy an adult will have for educational purposes. The primary roles consume a great amount of time and energy, and the amount left over for education and other secondary purposes can vary considerably among adults. Some may be very capable and efficient in performing their primary roles, and thus have ample capacity to participate successfully in adult education. Other adults, however, may have difficulty in coping with their primary roles, which stretch their capabilities to the outmost. Such people would have difficulty if an instructor added a lot more for them to do through homework and assignments. The instructor should attempt to judge the capabilities, energy, and time available of the adults in the group before deciding how much can be demanded for the secondary role of learning.

Having a reserve is essential to the mental health of an adult. The constant adjustment demanded of an adult over the life span, coupled with the need to learn that goes with it, places the adult learner in a position requiring relevant and efficient instruction. Inefficient instruction may place a load far greater than can be handled, and could push a learner to drop out of an instructional program in order to survive psychologically. If the learning assignments are heavy enough to upset the existing conditions, the learner could be hindered rather than helped by an educational program.

CONCLUSION

As an instructor you are faced with the difficult task of trying to reconcile an incredible range of individual differences within a single program of instruction. The solution to this problem has puzzled educators for a long time. One way to simplify the task is to think of each individual learner as possessing six characteristics to varying degrees. Finding the degree to which each learner possesses each characteristic is still a forbidding task, but some guidelines have been presented in this module so that you will know what to look for. The accompanying cassette tape discusses how instruction can be adjusted to the characteristics of adult learners.

Now, a final note on the relationship between you and your students. Your ability to listen to and communicate openly with your students will sometimes lead to an invitation to become involved in their personal problems. You can always give advice about the ways a student can improve performance or transfer learning to applied settings. This could involve suggestions about what kinds of additional knowledge or skills should be sought and the most appropriate resources available to the learner. As you are competent in your own field, there is no reason why you should not become involved in this type of counselling.

As far as students' personal problems are concerned, however, you must be realistic about your limitations. Be firm about the limits of your involvement, but be willing to refer the students to appropriate individuals or agencies which are best equipped to deal with particular personal problems. You should be familiar with the services available in your employing institution as well as with community resources such as ministers, doctors, legal aid, and crisis centres. Along the same lines, don't use your students to help you work out your own personal problems. Be willing to follow the same advice you would give to your students by taking your own personal problems to appropriate community agencies.

Your effectiveness as an instructor depends upon the amount of time, energy, thought, and skill you bring to bear on course-related activities. The nature of your students as adult learners means that they must effectively channel their energies into managing their own life roles and tasks.

Now that you have read over the module, listen to the cassette tape

ASSIGNMENT

Your responses to the following questions may be submitted on paper, or you may record them on a blank tape cassette.

1. Think about your own educational experiences as a child and then as an adult. Try to recall incidents that confirm or contradict the six general characterstics of adult learners. Has the instruction you've received as an adult always been conducted in the "adult" way?

2. For a moment, think of yourself as the Adult Education Director for your community. You have employed a senior secondary school teacher to teach a class of senior citizens one evening a week. The teacher has never taught adults before, so give him some advice and hints about how his instruction might have to be different for senior citizens compared with secondary school students.